

Hill Thalys A+UP



Hill Thalys Housing Survey 2021

Process

When we design individual houses we get to know the people who will live in our buildings very well.

When we design apartment buildings – we get to know our clients very well, but we rarely get to meet the people who will live in the spaces we create.

In 2021 we decided that we would like to know more about the people we design for. We wanted to know how they felt about their apartments, what they liked, what they didn't like and what we could improve in our projects into the future.

With the assistance of our clients, strata managers, email and mail outs, and old fashioned leaflet dropping we conducted an online survey that asked a range of questions.

Response rates varied markedly – but we did receive generous responses from people living in the following projects –

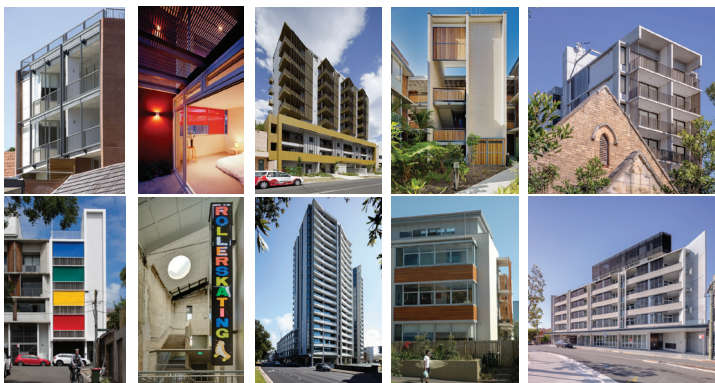
- Substation 175
- Llandaff Street Tower
- Bronte Road Apartments
- The Arc Apartments
- The Wedge
- Rose Bay Apartments
- Studios 54
- Majestic Apartments

Our survey was conducted in the period following the multiple COVID lock-downs.

We learnt much from the people who generously gave their time to complete our survey. In this document, we share some of the things that they told us.

This survey was undertaken informally by Hill Thalys in 2021. It does not make any representations as to statistical or scientific rigour. We caution against making broad scale assumptions on the basis of this sample. It has simply been a way for us to communicate with the end users of our buildings about design issues.

We sincerely thank all who took the time to complete our survey.



Housing Survey 2021

We are the architects who designed the apartment building that you live in.

We are conducting a survey to find out what the people living in our buildings think about their spaces.

We're keen to learn about how it feels to live in them - and what we can learn from you help us keep making our buildings better.

We'd love it if you could spare a few minutes to take our survey - link at the QR code - please tell us about your home!



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Who do we design for?

We began by asking simple questions to understand who it is we really have been designing for.

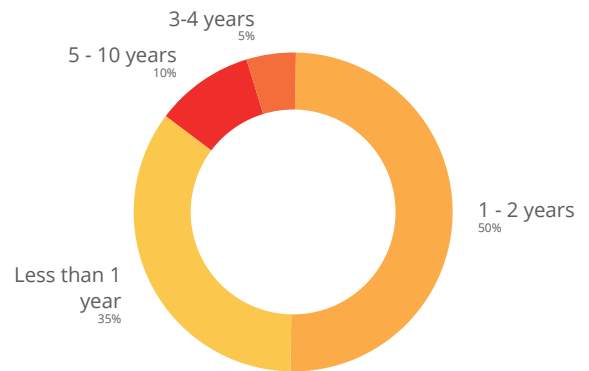
We are very proud that more than 90% of our respondents are renting their homes and that our design efforts are helping to make good living conditions for people who rent, not only those who own.

The majority of respondents had been living in their apartments for 1 - 2 years. Some had been living in their apartments for up to a decade.

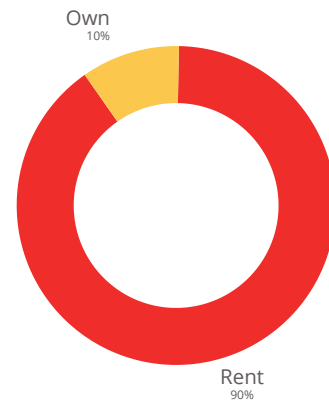
We also discovered that we design for a reasonable population of cats - and a few guinea pigs and fish.

Our survey was completed prior to the strata changes enabling greater levels of pet ownership - so we hope to see evidence of happy dogs in residence in the future.

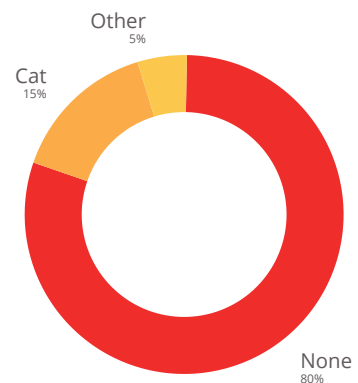
How long have you lived in your apartment?



What is your housing status?



Do you keep pets in your apartment?



What features are most important to you about your favourite outdoor space?

61% of respondents had access to a rooftop space and 72% of respondents had access to a balcony off a living space. 16.7% had access to a shared garden space.

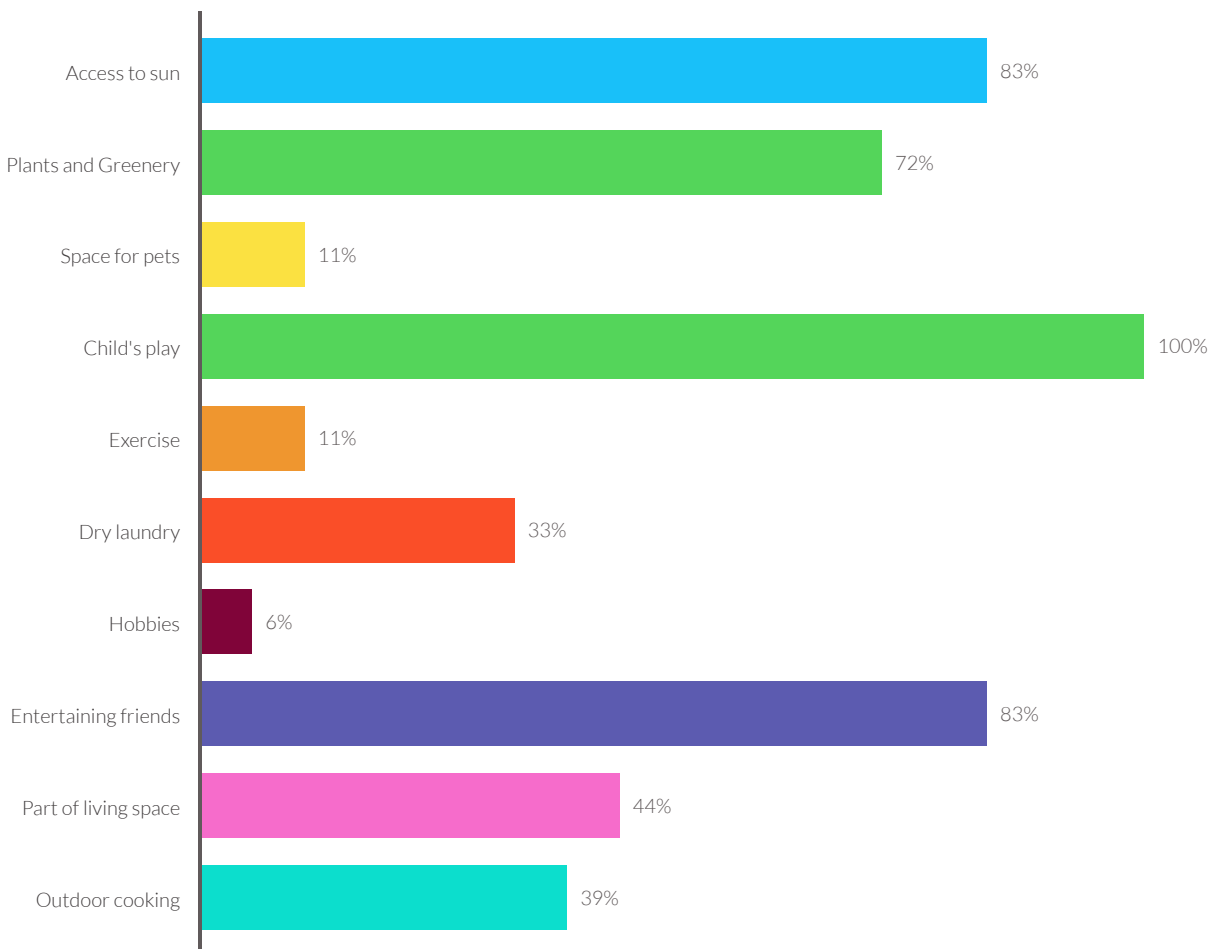
We asked people to identify their favourite space - and overwhelmingly that was their private balcony, or the rooftop in the case of the Wedge Apartments. Communal spaces may have scored comparatively lowly due to heightened caution during COVID.

We know that outdoor space is important to good living - and even more so since our shared experience of COVID lock-downs.

We were keen to dig a bit deeper and to see what the primary uses for outdoor space have been - to figure out what was useful, and what we may need to make more room for.

Unsurprisingly, access to sun and plants and greenery score highly amongst the responses.

Entertaining friends was the most popular activity for balconies and rooftops - but a range of activities are also important, even if they only happen intermittently. We use these responses to test our new designs and to make outdoor space flexible and as useful as possible.



Have you added any screening or materials to your balcony space?

Balconies are critical spaces in apartment design, and the balance between outlook, air and privacy is something that we continuously refine over time.

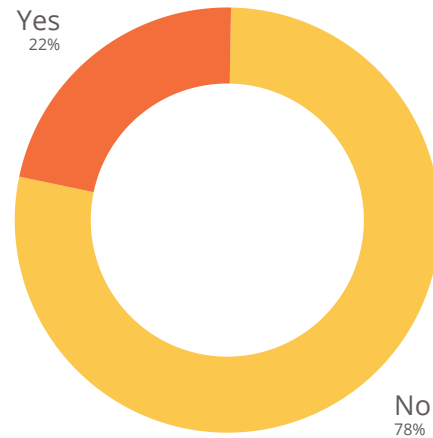
Over the life of our practice we have moved to increasingly solid balustrades in response to our growing awareness of the sense of privacy that people value in outdoor space.

We were keen to understand what additional features people were adding to their balconies to make them comfortable for their use.

20% of respondents had made changes to their balcony, ranging from the addition of pot plants and greenery to PVC screens for additional wind protection.

We are now adding a cat friendly balcony policy to our design thinking. The NCC spacing is designed to protect children, but not cats or small animals. Increasing pet ownership makes this something for us to consider more closely.

Have you added screening or materials to your balcony space?



“Noise and wind protection (PVC roll blind)”

“Pot plants to create more privacy from people in the Council carpark”

“There is a little bit of the balustrade that is glass and people on the street can see straight through...I popped a vertical garden over it”

“Cat mesh - to protect our cat from falling, which has happened twice.”

What do you really enjoy about the design of your outdoor space ?

What do people value about their outdoor space ?

Space, size and proportion.

A sense of privacy and protection was raised numerous times.

The ability to generously open a room to the outdoors.

And of course, sun, sun, sun and north orientation.

Although many of these things may seem obvious, it is an important reminder to us that the bar is not the minimums set in the ADG/SEPP65 - but we must always maximise north facing, good proportion private outdoor space for people - everywhere we can.

“The fact that the door opens all the way to the balcony really opens up the apartment”

“Generous size and good shape, privacy”

“Good amount of space for cooking and a couch.... Plus the timber floor”

“Its stunning rooftop garden w a gorgeous view!”

“Being covered in with a solid ‘roof’ above. Great protection at most times from rain and storms. Am able to use the balcony a lot. Can keep a door open for fresh air.”

“The outlook to the sky, the direction the building was built, and the angle of the balcony means I get lots of light in winter, and a bit less in summer - the perfect balance! The electric down light and size are perfect too.”

“The afternoon sun. Protected enough to enjoy all types of weather. Bifold doors, so we can enjoy indoor/outdoor all year round”

“I love the folding glass doors, makes the outdoor balcony part of the living room”

“Sun”

“The outdoor blinds are great. I love the wall to ceiling folding doors that we open during hot days.”

“Good size, private”

“North facing balcony”

“The view during sunrise”

“It doesn’t get too windy so my clothes stay hung on the airer”

What would you change/add to your outdoor space to make it work better for you ?

We were keen to understand how people would improve their outdoor space if they had the choice.

It was very interesting to us how questions of fine detail were very important to people - the texture of finishes and the location of power, water and lighting are very important.

Given their importance - we use these responses to talk to developers that we work for and to press for greater input or professional consultant input into the detailed design of these elements.

The question of winter-gardens is a very interesting one. Winter-gardens are included as floorspace by planning regulations so are typically avoided when trying to maximise yield on a site.

These responses should be of interest to planners and authorities. Enclosable balconies offer great wind and noise protection - particularly on busy street or rail frontages. It would be great if these opportunities were not penalised - particularly in amenity compromised locations.

“Sliding or folding windows to make verandah more versatile and usable in winter”

“A little more privacy and less road noise”

“Better lighting for night time entertaining.”

“I think the tiles are a bit tricky to clean because of the texture - Id prefer if the tiles inside extended outside, as they are really easy to clean! Apart from this I really love the balcony and it is the perfect outlook, size and exposure to sun for me and my plants :)”

“More space”

“Nothing!”

“Electric socket accessible outside Tap accessible outside”

“Higher wall between my balcony and the neighbouring balcony

“A tap on the front balcony to water the plants more easily (irrigation)”

“Adding an outdoor cooking space and built in furniture to the rooftop”

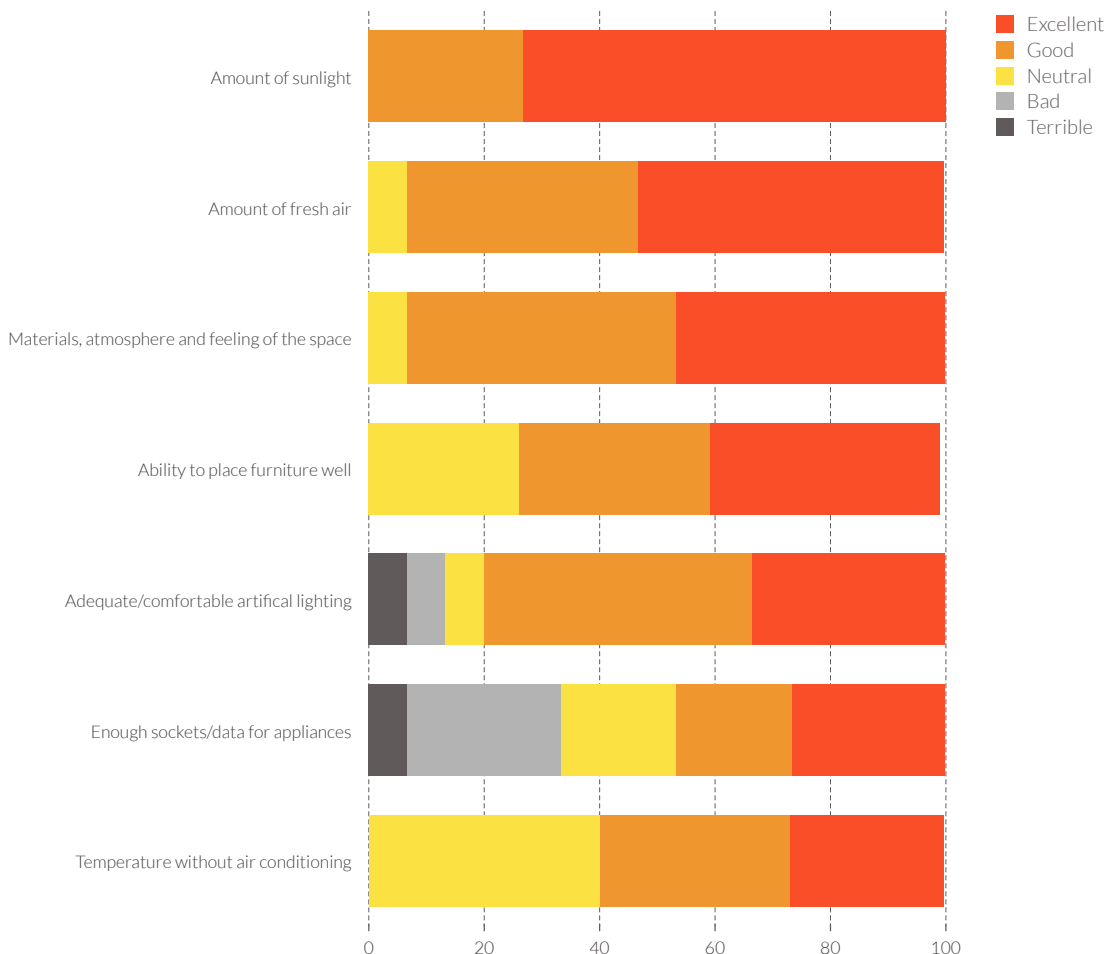
How well does your living space work for you?

We asked people about the functioning of their primary internal living spaces. 40% of respondents lived in studio apartments, 33% in 1 bedroom apartments and 27% in 2 bedroom apartments.

Light, air, functionality and passive temperature were rated well by respondents.

Detailed issues of power and lighting were the only areas that scored a rating of poor/terrible. Historically in mid range apartment design these aspects have been covered by electricians or lighting suppliers to a rate given by builder/developers. Increasingly - architects or interior designers are having much greater input into the detailed design of the functionality of living areas.

We use these results to demonstrate to our clients that design input across all levels of details really matters - and that people notice. Having power and data in the right place is cost neutral - and a small amount of design input has the opportunity to make a big impact.



Was there anything about your apartment that made life easier during lock-down?

COVID lock-downs made us all think differently about our homes and how they work for us.

66% of respondents set up a working space in their dining room. Data and extensive power sockets are now must have items in this key flexible family space.

Approximately 20% of respondents had workspaces set up in their bedroom, their living space or their studio apartment. Clearly, studies and study nooks have become essential items in all homes. Even if there were multiple people working from different places in the home – a place with a neutral background for a zoom meeting is essential.

Interestingly, dual level apartments received excellent feedback. Couples liked the opportunity to work on different floors during the day. Dual level apartments have generally been limited on the advice of real estate agents in recent years. The addition of enclosure/sound proofing between levels was noted as being desirable.

Less tangibly, but equally importantly a sense of openness and outlook made people feel less 'closed in' and connected to the outside world.

Was there anything about your apartment that made life easier during lock-down?

Is there any change that could have made your life easier during lock-down?

“Second bedroom and dining room table provide a good amount of separation”

“Big balcony, natural light & lovely materials. High ceilings. Gorgeous view of sky & street. Don't feel closed in.”

“Having an outdoor space and big sliding doors to open up the space, weather permitting.”

“Outlook and view with lots of light and views. Nice high ceiling. Lots of storage and space for plants. Lots of natural light. Big balcony. Private laundry and dryer, so no need to feel unsafe using shared equipment.”

“Loads of natural light. Living area opens up to outdoor area”

“Split level”

“Having a separate room upstairs so that one could work downstairs and one upstairs.”

“The balcony made a huge difference”

“NBN fibre to the premises internet”

“More sockets”

“More room for a desk”

“Door between split levels so that noise does not travel”

“A little study nook so i'm not teaching on zoom in my bedroom or kitchen haha :)”

“A little nook, so I'm not teaching in my bedroom space would be nice and feel a bit more professional :)”

A 'divider' or screened area to separate the paper mess when I want to hide it from view.

Thermal comfort

We asked people to select the forms of passive and active climate control that they had available in their apartments.

Those responses were further refined by questions relating to the use of different passive and active modes.

We are often told that people no longer understand how to manipulate passive thermal comfort elements in housing.

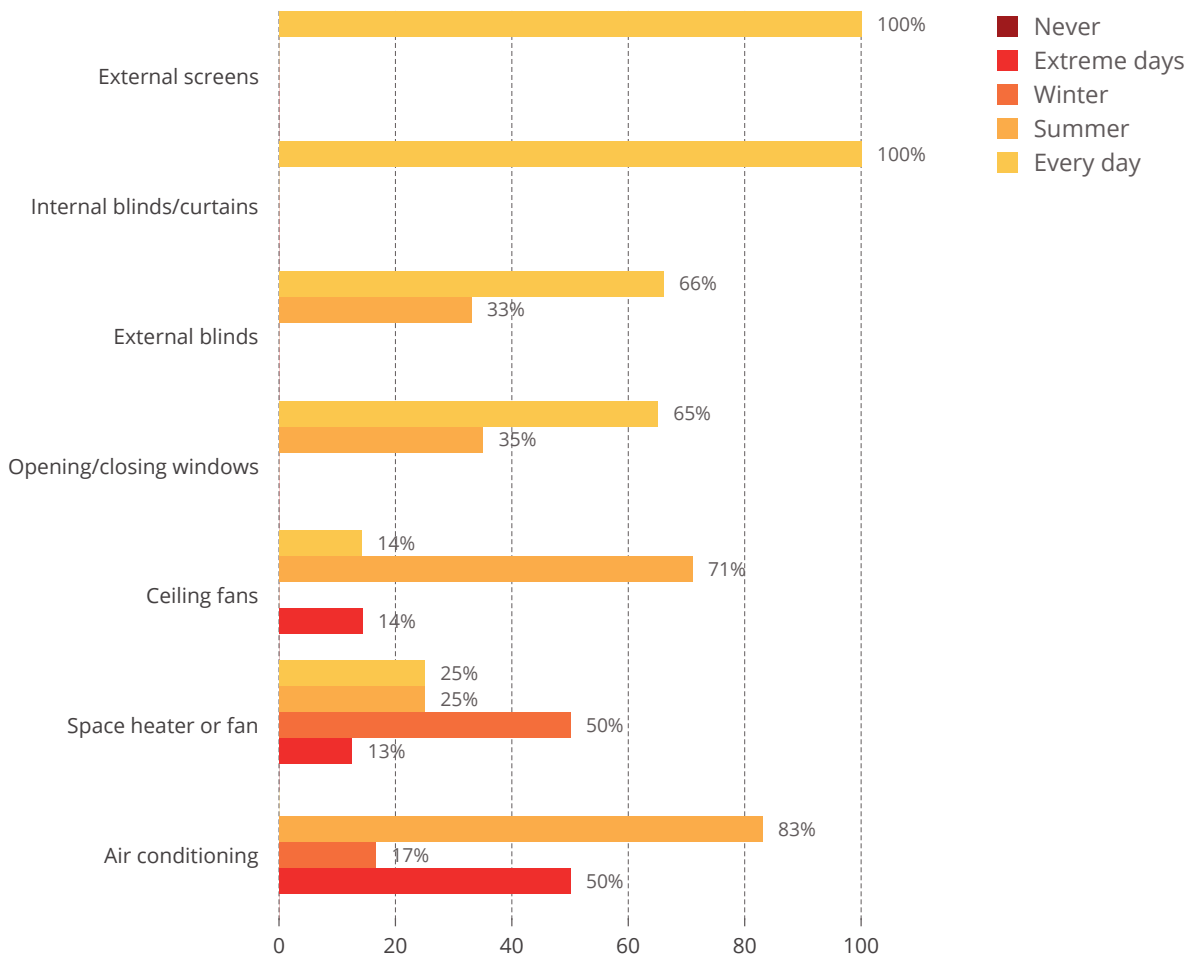
These results suggest otherwise. 100% of people who reported having access to external screens used them daily. The most commonly used elements to adjust temperature were the daily use of internal and external blinds and screens, and the manipulation of windows for breeze paths.

Unsurprisingly, ceiling fans were used most intensively during summer and extreme weather where available.

Air conditioning and space heating was used where available - but typically in summer and extreme weather days, and more limited use in winter.

Not a single respondent reported using air conditioning on a daily basis.

50% of respondents reported energy bills were lower than other homes where they have lived.



Sociability

Sociability and a sense of community are highly nuanced aspects of apartment living. We were keen to ask questions to help us understand the range of tendencies that exist in places we have designed.

We were interested in understanding the sense of homecoming. Results to this question reinforced the nature of a lot of our work in terms of minimising parking. 93% of respondents walk home – entering from the street and using the stairs or lift.

13% reported regularly using the stairs. Building regulations do require enclosed stairs in most instances – but we’re keen to keep working to see how we can make stairs a more attractive option for building users.

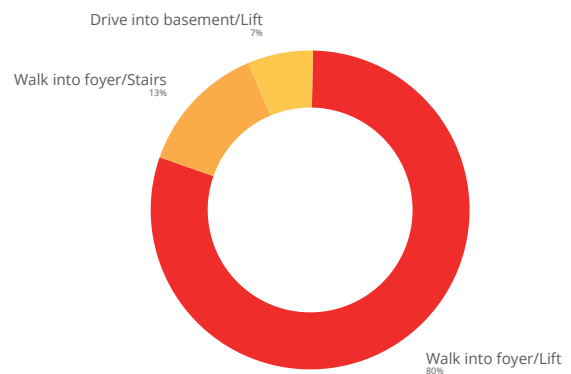
We also asked people to rank the different spaces in their building in terms of their interaction with others. The findings from this question reinforce that all of the common areas in buildings matter equally as opportunities for incidental interaction and engagement with others.

We asked people about whether they had the right level of privacy or sense of community to suit their needs. The diversity of responses was very interesting. People valued casual interaction most strongly although not universally. Some made close friends and knew their neighbours very well – others preferred to keep more to themselves.

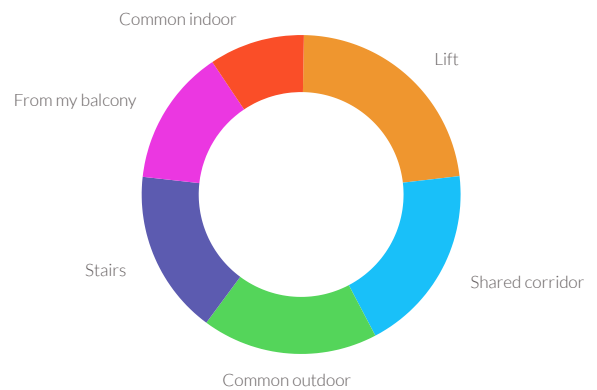
From this we are thinking about the adaptability and range of social spaces in our housing. Free choice is critical.

Opportunities for engagement at a time, place and level that suits different people are important. Never assume whether people will opt in or out – provide choice.

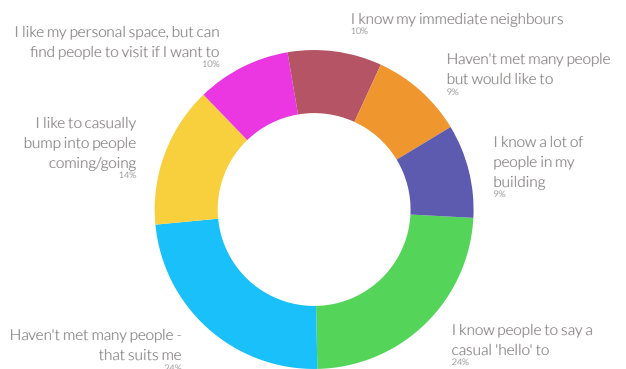
How do you typically arrive home to your apartment?



When do you most typically see/talk to your neighbours? Rank from most to least interaction.



Do you have the right level of privacy/community for you?



Why did you choose to live in this apartment?

We included questions about peoples reasons for selecting their apartment. We were keen to understand the decisions and priorities at play - both design and non-design related.

100% of respondents to this question noted that good light and air were important.

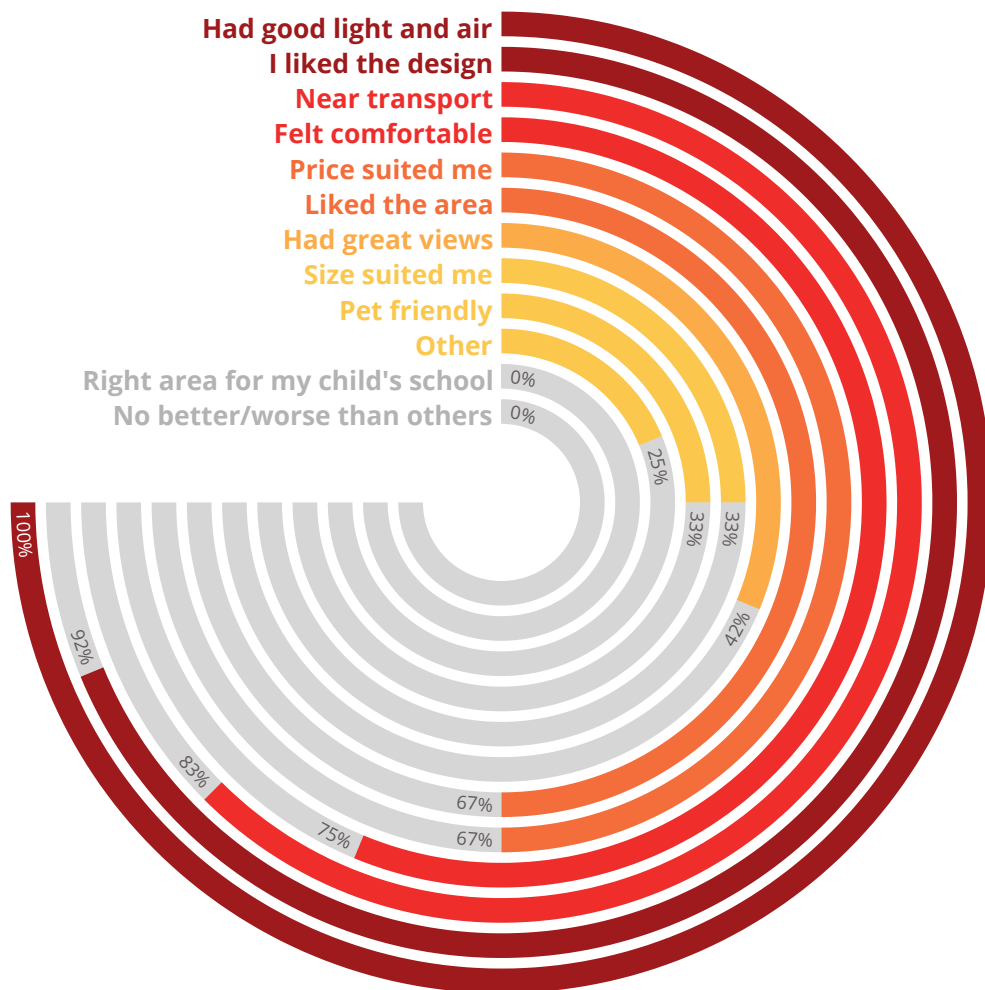
92% of respondents noted that design was important to them.

Access to transport came in at 83% in reflection of the 'non-car' demographic that featured highly in our responses. Price and local area were noted by 67% of respondents.

There was significant variation in response between buildings on issues like Views. Other written responses included issues like 'high ceilings', 'proximity to CBD', 'no carpet' and 'amount of storage'.

We can't draw broad conclusions from the size of our sample - but we do talk to our clients about the fact that amenity and design are important factors for people making decisions about where to live.

Investment in design that delivers high amenity is more important than you may initially think.



What is your favourite thing about your apartment?

We didn't receive a large number of responses to more open questions at the end of the survey - but we were keen to see if we could find out what people responded most strongly to in terms of living in their apartment.

The responses we did receive confirmed the great diversity of tastes, likes, dislikes and priorities that need to be accommodated in housing. This aspect of housing is of intense interest to us. It is particular to multiple housing, and the antithesis of the highly curated attitude to aesthetic choices in bespoke single housing.

A sample of responses are included to the right, with the representative word cloud of the full responses below.

"The big balcony, lots of light and fresh air, the built-ins and sleek whiteness."

"I love the design. Especially the floorboards and concrete ceiling. I love that our living space opens up to the outdoor area"

"The concrete ceilings, the glass folding doors onto the balcony, the kitchen island bench, the clever design creating lots of light, the breeze that comes through if I open the front balcony and back balcony door, the green awning, and the depth of view from my balcony (Sorry can't choose one)"

"The industrial style (concrete ceiling) and balcony views of city"



Is there anything you'd like to change about how building/ apartment looks or works?

We also asked people what they would change about the functioning or appearance of their building/apartment if they had the choice. A sample of responses are included right.

Responses relating to more space or increased sized spaces were exclusively tied to studio apartments. These complexes do offer indoor and outdoor common spaces which are typically thought to offset more compact living arrangements. We are thinking more about the pros/cons of these apartment types in terms of their long term suitability to the housing mix in the city.

The availability of car parking was mentioned - even in locations extremely well serviced by public transport. This cultural shift has a way to go in Sydney and availability of dedicated car share may be worth considering in certain locations/ building types.

92% of respondents appreciated the look and feeling of their building externally while 8% responded that these issues did not matter to them.

We received a balance of positive and negative responses to the use of colour in the latter questions in our survey. The responses have us thinking more about how to amplify elements that people can adjust or personalise to their own tastes - without restricting the building's ability to generate a specific or identifiable architectural character.

"I would like to have more space inside so I could fit a lounge and more space on the balcony for entertaining"

"The foyer is really windy and even the external corridors to enter in the apartments are extremely windy"

"No"

"No I think it's very cute"

"Not a fan of the stainless steel bench tops or back-splash"

"The green panel on the outside of the building"

"the back balcony (off bedroom) would be much more useful if it was screened from the street"

"I don't like the red accent detail in my apartment."

"More underground parking spaces as I did not get one and have to use street parking"

"My apartment works majestically"

"I'd like a car space."

"No"

"Keys to the fire stairs that work - so if the lift stops working again we can get into our apartment."

"Would be great if the entrance wouldn't open straight into the living space, some extra storage under the building (the car spaces are rather tight and are all open-plan). But it's a great building, I love it!"

"I would add more storage"

"Should be the option to close of the upstairs area/ bedroom from downstairs"
